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EPA steps into PCB cleanup

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The federal agency issued a unilateral administrative order to General Electric.

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By Kevin Bowen, Rome News-Tribune Staff Writer

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Citing concerns with the speed and quality of the action under way, the federal Environmental Protection Agency decided Thursday to intervene in the PCB cleanup at the GE plant in Rome.

The EPA issued a unilateral administrative order to General Electric because the agency fears a proposed cleanup plan "may not provide for adequate protection of public health and the environment."

"Specifically, EPA is concerned that the proposed plan does not require a complete characterization of all source material, does not reflect an understanding of the movement of contaminants in the entire area and lacks a full examination of all cleanup alternatives," said the EPA in a statement announcing the action.

Typically, a unilateral order requires a cleanup by the company in question, if the responsible parties are "not willing to reach a timely settlement or undertake work under a consent order or decree," according to the EPA Web site, www.epa.gov.

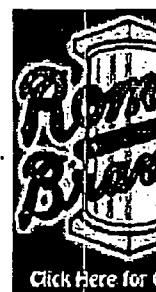
The action will require GE to perform a removal action and a remedial investigation and feasibility study to find the limits of the contamination. They also must develop and evaluate cleanup methods.

If the company does not comply, the EPA may go to court to get the company to conduct a cleanup. EPA may also conduct a cleanup and charge the company, if they do not comply with the order, according to EPA documents.

Contamination of polychlorinated biphenyls in and around the plant has been linked to the production of medium transformer rods at the now-closed GE plant from 1953-1977.

PCBs are listed as probable human carcinogens by the EPA.

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General Electric has worked out a plan with the Georgia Environmental Protection Division to clean up the properties along the Redmond Circle Corridor. That plan stands in a public comment period. GE held a public meeting Thursday night in Rome to discuss that effort.

GE officials were displeased with the EPA's move. Plant manager Richard Lester said it would likely delay the cleanup process as GE works to satisfy both federal and state officials.

"This is a surprise to us. They did not notify GE or the EPD that they would take this action," Lester said.

He said he is hopeful that the EPA will allow the company and EPD to move forward on the original plan.

A statement issued Thursday by the EPD also criticized the intervention.

"EPD has worked long and hard with GE and we think we had a reasonable an appropriate solution. Until and unless we learn more after analyzing the USEPA order, we feel the EPD agreement with GE is satisfactory," the statement said.

Ken Grall, a EPD project engineer on hand for the GE meeting, said the EPA would take its own course, as would the EPD, in enforcing its rules.

"EPD does think that we have a good agreement for action along the Redmond corridor," Grall said.

Coosa River Basin Initiative Executive Director Mitch Lawson said he was pleased with the decision.

"I'm glad they're getting involved," Lawson said. "(EPA intervention is) what it is going to take."

The federal government has been considering intervention since last May. Specifically, it has considered whether to place the site on the Superfund National Priority List, a list of the worst environmental hazard sites in the country.

Lester said the addition of GE to that list would require a process that has not taken place.

THE EPA SAID

ATLANTA (June 12, 2003) — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced today that it has issued a Unilateral Administrative Order (Order) to the General Electric Company (GE) in Rome, Floyd County, Georgia to address cleanup at the GE Rome site. EPA issued the Order because of concerns that GE's proposed cleanup plan may not provide for adequate protection of



public health and the environment. Specifically, EPA is concerned that the proposed plan does not require a complete characterization of all source material, does not reflect an understanding of the movement of contaminants in the entire area and lacks a full examination of all cleanup alternatives.

The Order, issued in accordance with the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), requires GE to perform a Removal Action and a Remedial Investigation/Feasibility Study to investigate the nature and full horizontal and vertical extent of contamination at the site, and to develop and evaluate potential cleanup alternatives. The Removal Action requires GE to take such actions necessary to mitigate any current or potential imminent and substantial threat to human health, and the environment. GE is required to conduct all work under this Order in compliance with all applicable EPA guidance, policies and procedures. EPA has been contacted by GE and the Georgia Environmental Protection Division to further discuss the cleanup of the GE Rome site.

The GE facility operated from approximately 1952 to 1997 and produced a variety of medium-capacity electrical transformers. A wide range of hazardous substances has been detected at the GE facility.

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